Summer Reading Programs as a Means of Addressing the Growing Academic Gap between High- and Low-Income Students

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

Brittany Moran

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Rebecca Brown

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

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Abstract

An effective education system is the backbone of a successful society, as it teaches future citizens and workers the skills and knowledge they need to be productive members of said society. In a nation as large and diverse as the United States of America, there are bound to be challenges and setbacks when implementing an operational education system. However, this does not excuse the fact that the public education system has failed to adequately address the consistently growing gap in academic skills between students from high- and low-income backgrounds. This has had a profound negative impact on the opportunity that many low-income students have to become engaged and accomplished adults. In my thesis, I present the argument that summer reading programs are an overlooked option to address this academic gap. I do so by analyzing the nature of this gap, how Summer Reading Setback (SRS) is the main reason the gap exists, how summer reading programs can be used to address SRS and the subsequent gap, and, finally, by analyzing the effectiveness of a summer reading program that I myself created and implemented. It is my hope that this paper spreads awareness of the large academic gap between students of different socioeconomic classes and encourages further research and funding for summer reading programs to address this problem.

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follow through on my idea to create a summer reading program, which became my motivation to write this thesis.

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Finally, I want to thank my family & friends who offered constant reassurance, encouragement, and editing assistance while I wrote this thesis.

Process Analysis Statement

The process of writing this thesis began when I first envisioned creating a summer reading program in my hometown of Palatine, Illinois. This was during the Summer of 2017, and in the upcoming months of the Fall of 2017 semester, the immersive learning program I participated in, which had a focus on being a teacher engaged in their students' surrounding communities, further inspired me to pursue this idea by teaching me about the detrimental impact Summer Reading Setback can have on low-income students. After writing down some initial thoughts, I reached out to the organizations back in Palatine that would make my anticipated program a reality. Over my winter break, I met with the leaders of these organizations, Partners for our Communities and the Palatine Public Library, who agreed to help me plan and implement my program with their resources, partnerships, and guidance. It was then my responsibility to plan out every aspect of the program. At first, I thought that this would be a daunting process. Luckily, I was surprised to find that because of how interested and invested I was in the planning and success of the program, it made the planning process more enjoyable and I was very motivated to make it the best it could be.

After securing partnerships with these organizations, I began my planning by meeting with some of my mentors at Ball State, professors from my Fall 2017 immersive program Schools within the Context of Community. While meeting with them, I took notes on the ideas they offered for how to begin making the program a reality, as well as what research I should look into when planning the program. It was during this meeting that I first realized I could use this program as the basis for my honors thesis. From this point on, I used a binder I created to gather the research and notes I had while planning the program that would become Readers to Leaders. The different sections included: flyers/promotional information, schedule and events,

volunteer information, and supplemental research. As I began to plan the program, I used the internet and professors' references to gather a variety of research on the best ways to teach English Language Learners and provide summer instruction. I kept this research and notes in the binder I created.

Eventually, I formalized a schedule and plan for the program. I got approval for it from POC and then began to recruit volunteers via existing connections and friendships, email, and contacting the teachers in the local high schools' Family & Consumer Science Departments. I then trained volunteers. The program had its kick-off in the beginning of June and ran through the end of July. The process of recruiting, training, and running the program is more detailed in the thesis itself

Throughout the program, I kept track of students' work, including weekly reading checks, pieces of writing, and notes from the volunteers they were paired with. I also recorded weekly attendance rates and who was present each week, for volunteers and students. Family members' feedback was also utilized, in the form of surveys and conversations. All of these methods were valuable forms of informative and in-the-moment assessment of the program, and also provided the basis for reflection and data that I utilized while writing my thesis. I am glad that I thought to keep track of this information, as they can also help shape planning for this program in future summers as well as serve as a base to compare them to.

After Readers to Leaders had run its course, and I was back on campus during the August 2018 for the fall semester of my senior year, I began to meet with my thesis advisor, Dr. Rebecca Brown. We started to formulate a plan for how to tackle the write up portion of my thesis. I chose Dr. Brown because she had been my professor for a class in the spring of 2018 and also was my advisor for part of my Departmental Honors project, which also pertained to Readers to

Leaders. She helped me to gather research and gave me pointers on finding research online via Ball State's databases. I used these databases and some books I checked out from the library to gather research that would inform the argument of my thesis. Dr. Brown and I agreed that I should come up with a flexible timeline for when I wanted to get different components of my thesis completed and submitted to her for editing. We did so, and I was able to plan out the different sections of my thesis that would be essential to its argument, which in the end resulted in the present four different sections.

Even before I began writing this paper, I spent a large amount of time gathering and reading the research I collected in order to make sure my own argument was supported by others' findings as well. As I read the research, I found that an important part of making what I read meaningful to me, and making it most available when I began to write, was annotating it. I usually would highlight in different colors quotes or information that pertains to each different section I planned on writing. This initial close-reading resulted in organization that made writing each section more feasible. Without doing so, I think it would have been much more difficult to utilize all of the research I had read effectively in my own thesis.

I found that it often took more time to read all the research than I had originally planned. This is because as I learned more about the academic gap, Summer Reading Setback, or Summer Reading Programs, I also learned how much more I needed to know before I could begin writing about each topic. I learned that when writing about something that is so personally important to me as an educator, such as the academic gap between students of different socioeconomic classes, I wanted to make sure I was thorough in my research. Although this meant spending more time gathering and reading the available papers and data, it paid off in the end with a well-informed thesis that I am proud of.

I had written research papers in the past, however they had focused on literature and not on data I had collected or a topic that was so important to me and my future career. As a result, I noticed a difference between my motivation and the interest I had in my thesis when compared to past papers I had written. I learned that because of my investment in the field of education and the role I believe it plays in addressing inequities in our society, I found myself more dedicated to making this thesis the best it could be.

Introduction

Education is failing poor students all over the United States. They are falling behind in all subjects, especially Language Arts. The academic gap between higher socioeconomic status (SES) and lower SES students has grown substantially, and the strategy of simply targeting classroom instruction is not having the desired positive impact of minimizing this gap. It is time for policy makers and community members to work together to address this area of need if they truly want to use education to address poverty in the United States. Summer learning loss has been attributed as one of the main reasons for this gap, as the availability of resources, specifically books, learning time spent with adults, and motivation to practice skills deplete during the summer for lower socioeconomic students.

Participating in a summer reading program shows a positive correlation to the reduced impact of summer learning loss, demonstrating that these programs are an undervalued way to target the growing academic gap between high and low SES (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2017; Allington et. al., 2010; Augustine et. al., 2016; Horowitz & Samuels, 2017). In order for such a summer reading program to be effective, it needs to contain key elements that inspire students to read: access to books, element of student choice, and trained volunteers/educators to lead the program. I had the opportunity to create and lead a summer reading program, titled *Readers to Leaders* during the summer of 2018 in partnership with a community organization 'Partners for Our Communities' in Palatine, Illinois. This experience informs the argument I present in this paper regarding the impact a summer reading program can have on minimizing the gap between students in separate economic classes. Through analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of this program, I intend to present the components necessary to have an effective summer reading

program and use that information to advocate for an increase in the presence and funding for such programs.

Section 1: The Current Gap between Low and High SES Students

In order to make the argument that these programs are necessary, one needs to first understand the current gap between low and high SES students, low SES students being defined by their membership in the free or reduced meal program. As a current pre-service teacher who grew up in an upper middle-class suburb of Chicago and has worked in schools that are much lower socioeconomically than where I grew up, I first noticed this gap when I began my practicums. The students I worked with as a senior in high school were recipients of an education and a learning environment much different than students of the same age in lower SES schools in Muncie, Indiana. Unfortunately, this comparison is not exclusive to these two contrasting areas. According to Allington and his colleagues, in *Addressing Summer Reading Setback Among Economically Disadvantaged Elementary Students,* in the United States "77% more economically advantaged fourth-grade students achieved above the basic level of proficiency, [and] only 46% of poor students achieved this modest level of reading development," citing a 31% difference in the reading proficiencies between high and low SES students (2010, p. 412). In short, poor students are significantly falling behind their financially better-off peers, those falling into the high SES category, when comparing both party's reading development.

The implications of this gap go far beyond students lagging behind in their reading development while in elementary school. Unfortunately, the low reading growth present in the United States' poor students often haunts them far beyond their primary years and into the rest of their lives. On average, by the time students from low income families are seniors in high school "the gap [them and their non-poor peers] is four years wide" (Allington & and McGill-Franzen,

2017, p. 9). In other words, low income students are reading at an eighth-grade reading level as twelfth-graders, while their higher SES counterparts are meeting grade level benchmarks. This is assuming that those students even make it as far as twelfth grade, as many low-income students do not graduate from high school. For example, another set of staggering statistics on the negative impact this reading gap has on students states that "one in six children who are not reading proficiently in third grade do not graduate from high school in time," which is a rate four times higher than the drop-out rate of proficient readers (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011, p. 3). When this is contemplated alongside the fact that, on average, "22 percent of children who have lived in poverty do not graduate from high school, compared to 6 percent of those who have never been poor," the importance of finding a way to better support the reading development of low income students becomes even more evident (p. 3).

When discussing this reading achievement disparity, many scholars intertwine it with the similar difference between the academic performance of students of color and white students. These issues are difficult to separate, as white students, on average, come from families with a higher socioeconomic background than their non-white counterparts (Reeves, Rodrigue, & Kneebone, 2016). However, the two categorizations and their interactions are much more multifaceted. At the same time that "American schools have been making progress with African-American children," meaning they have begun to minimize the gap between them and white students, they simultaneously have been "losing ground in educating the wider group of children in poverty" (Allington and McGill-Franzen, 2017, p. 3). The research comparing the two achievement gaps clarifies that, while both areas demand attention and the awareness of educators, the fact that the rich/poor gap "is twice the black/white achievement gap" should further concern those invested in education (McGill-Franzen, Ward, & Cahill, 2016, p. 586).

The most concerning area is the intersectionality of the students who are both non-white and recipients of free or reduced lunches. Considering that Black and Hispanic students are not only more likely to live in poverty but also "more likely to live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty and low-performing schools," they are most definitely receiving the 'short end of the stick' when it comes to their academic preparedness (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011, p. 7). When compared to white students with similar reading skills, "Black and Hispanic students who haven't mastered reading in third grade are 11-12 percentage points less likely to graduate from high school," a statistic demonstrating the importance of considering students' racial and socioeconomic background (p. 9). This disturbing difference in graduation rates between proficient and non-proficient readers, separated by race, can be seen in Figure 1 below, as well.

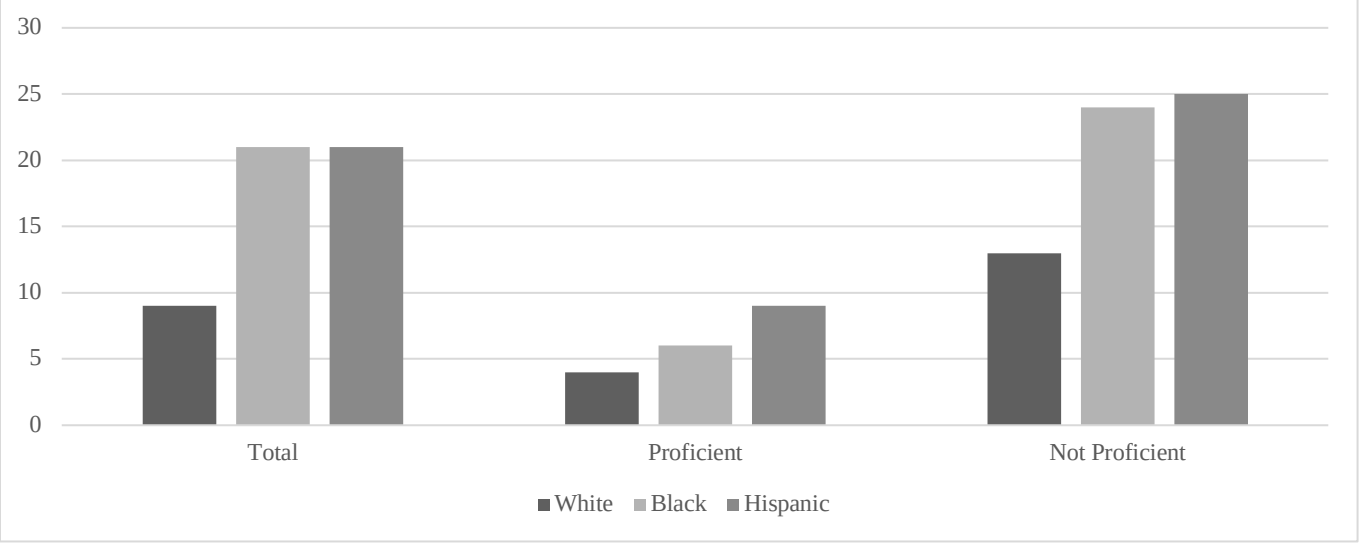

Figure 1: Children Not Graduating by Race-Ethnicity. Reprinted from *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*, by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011, retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED518818. Copyright 2011 by The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

While there are many factors that are impactful upon the creation and perpetual nature of this gap, one of the reasons scholars have attributed as an initial source are the differences in learning experiences prior to kindergarten between high SES and low SES students. These

learning experiences are shaped by the child's environment, exposure to literacy, and the resources available to them before they begin kindergarten. As Allington and McGill-Franzen convey in *Summer Reading Loss is the Basis of Almost All the Rich/Poor Reading Gap*, "children from low-income families begin school already behind children from families with higher incomes" often entering kindergarten already "ranking in the bottom third of their peers" when it comes to knowing letter names and sounds (2017, p. 3, 4). This substantial incoming difference between the lower SES students and their peers means that they have a lot of catching up to do in order to be on par in their reading development.

When understanding the reasons for this initial deficit of skills on the behalf of lower socioeconomic students, it is important to take into account their developmental environment and interactions in the realm of literacy. Unfortunately, students with a higher socioeconomic status are exposed to literacy more often and in more meaningful ways, aiding their development from a young age. In an analysis of children growing up in low income families, McCombs and colleagues, in *Time, Learning, Learning Decay, and Summer Learning Loss*, found that these students often "heard approximately one-half to one-third as many spoken words as children in more affluent households," putting them behind in their word recognition and vocabulary development (2011, p. 22). They attributed this to the fact that, on average, "low income parents read with, teach, and talk to their child less frequently" than parents from families with higher incomes (p. 22). It is important to note that this does not necessarily denote a lack of care about literacy or their children from low income parents, but rather a difference in the ability to make these interactions as much of a purposeful priority.

The pre-school programs available to students of different socioeconomic classes differ as well. Upon comparing pre-school programs, Allington and McGill-Franzen found that those

"serving middle-class children are far more likely to provide print rich learning environments than programs serving children from low-income families," citing another important difference between the early education experiences of students (2017, p. 4). These print rich learning environments can be measured in many ways, but Neuman and Celano chose to look at the inequities in the number of resources, the range and quality of materials, the availability of public space and places for reading, and the amount of quality literacy materials in child care centers and in elementary schools." (2012, p. 15) This variety of materials and opportunities to work on literacy help support a child's reading and writing development. Without influential literacy-centered interactions at home or in preschool, it is only natural that lower SES students begin their formal schooling behind their middle- or upper-class peers.

Never-the-less, "about a third of the [difference between low-income and middle-class students' scores] was present when these students began first grade," which, although that is a substantial difference, still leaves two-thirds of the gap to be caused by other factors (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2017, p. 8). Even once students begin elementary school, the availability of resources and an environment that would help to develop their language arts skills are seldom available to them and their families. Besides the explicit instruction students receive over the course of the school year, there are outside factors influencing their development as readers and writers, including their access to print. In an analysis of two libraries within the same city but in different socioeconomic areas, Neuman and Celano shed light on the many inequities they found, also referring to differences resources, materials, and availability of a pace to read.(2012, p. 15) Despite the libraries being studied residing in the same city, the authors came to find that the socioeconomic status of different areas in the city had a large impact on their respective residents.

This reaffirmed their conclusions from their previous study, during which two upper and two lower class communities all from within the same city were analyzed. When seeing the differences between the resources, experiences, and public places conducive to reading available to families within the same city but in different social classes, they found that "access to information for poor families and their children was seen as expendable," as demonstrated by their observations and data regarding each community's libraries and general access to print (Neuman & Celano, 2012, p. 21). This results in "children's access to print resources [being] widely different" even though they are technically from the same city and should be receiving the same allocation of funds and resources (Neuman & Celano, 2001, p. 17).

These two studies present troubling indications of some of the reasons for the gap between low and high-income students. It is clear that "children learn about literacy through contact, experiences, and observations of written language use in their everyday lives," and the resulting lack of exposure and experiences with print that lower socioeconomic students experience, as presented in the Neuman and Celano studies, leads to these students being "less likely to be skilled at the initial acquisition process, less likely to become involved in reading-related activities, and less motivated to read." (2001, p. 13, 24) Unfortunately, these lack of skills and negative attitudes toward reading often stick with low income students because what is being done during the school-day and school-year are not enough to counteract their initial deficit.

Large-scale attempts have been made to close this gap, and knowledge of this gap in students' reading development has existed for quite some time, but unfortunately this awareness has done little to incite change for poor students. Government agencies have tried to provide equal opportunity and education for all students through programs such as the No Child Left Behind Act, which claimed a "commitment to ensuring that all students, regardless of their

background, receive a quality education" (U.S. Department of Education, 2005, para.1). This Act was focused on changing the funding and accountability of schools by targeting how growth was measured and using additional funding to try and target the needs of students in the classroom, especially those who have traditionally been 'left behind'. This included economically disadvantaged students and those with disabilities. While this effort is noble, and many hoped that it would help to address the numerous disparities in education, socioeconomically and otherwise, its approach has appeared to have fallen short. In reference to the disparity between students in different socioeconomic classes, Allington and McGill-Franzen examined the historical presence of the reading achievement gap. Unfortunately, post No Child Left Behind, the gap has continued to grow and "over the past 30 years, the reading achievement gap between students from the 90th and 10th percentile income families [had] an increase of 40%". (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2017, p. 3). It is imperative that the United States education system as a whole finds alternative methods to minimizing the gap between its low SES and high SES students, which calls for a better understanding of why this gap exists in the first place.

All of these measures trying to promote equity for students from different economic backgrounds, most of which focus on targeting students' learning and assessment during the school-day and school-year, have not had the desired impact as the gap is still increasing. By focusing efforts to minimize the SES academic gap solely on what is happening in the classroom while school is in session, these measures are subsequently falling short and ignoring the data that indicates that "reading growth during the months school is in session is comparable in schools with many poor children and schools with few poor children" (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2017, p. 10). Allington and McGill-Franzen describe a concept titled the "faucet

theory," first researched by Entwisle, Alexandar, and Olson, when articulating why targeting the gap through school-year only approaches is falling short:

> "When the school faucet is turned on- that is when schools are in session- children of every economic background benefit roughly equally, but when the school faucet is turned off, as during the summer vacations, reading proficiency among children from more economically advantaged families continues to develop, whereas no similar growth is observed in economically disadvantaged children." (2010, p. 413)

This concept has best been described as Summer Learning Loss/Summer Slide, and when specifically referencing the areas of literacy, Summer Reading Loss or Summer Reading Setback, and it deserves more serious consideration as an area of improvement in the current education system.

Section 2: Summer Reading Setback

Although what is learned during the school year is valuable and imperative to all students' success, I argue that more of an emphasis needs to be placed on the impact of Summer Reading Setback. If schools and government bodies truly want to minimize the gap between low and high SES students, they need to begin to understand what Summer Reading Setback is and how it is affecting their students. Once this is understood, they can begin to address this concept that holds back so many students who are socioeconomically underprivileged.

As its name explains, Summer Reading Setback, SRS, is the concept that over the course of summer break students fall back in their reading development. One of the first researchers to write about this concept was sociologist Barbara Heyns (1978). Heyns wanted to research the effects that a long period without schooling has on students and did so by comparing "the lives of children during the academic year to their lives during the summer." (1978, p.xi). When

researching the impact of summer breaks, Heyns first points out that summer breaks cause a depletion in skills for most students, but that they also create a "gap between … low- and high-income children [that] widens disproportionately during the months when school is not in session." (p. 187) By publishing her book with research to help support this claim, Heyns created the foundation for researchers in the field to prod further into why this might be and what can be done to address this gap. Since then, many researchers and studies have reaffirmed her findings in a variety of settings (Alligton and McGill-Franzen, 2003; Allington et. al., 2010; Beach et. al., 2018; McCombs et. al., 2011). To summarize, Allington and Franzen wrote that SRS "occurs when students return to school after summer vacation with diminished reading skills, presumably from lack of adequate reading practice" (2003, p. 20). Of course, most classroom teachers are already aware of their students' slide backwards over breaks from school.

What teachers and other education professionals may not realize is how it may manifest itself differently in each student, depending on their background. It can, and often does, affect students of all socioeconomic backgrounds; however, it is more common for the setback to take a greater toll on lower income students. This is for a variety of reasons, including differences in familial attitudes towards reading, book access, print exposure, and other available resources, which I will further articulate in the following paragraphs. These differences are what leads to the previously established gap between them and their more privileged peers. This summer learning loss "accounts for two-thirds of the achievement gap in reading between low-income children and their middle-income peers by ninth grade," according to the National Summer Learning Association (2018, p. 1). This is why Allington and McGill-Franzen (2003) argue that "efforts targeted only at improving curriculum and instruction in high-poverty schools were

unlikely to close the reading achievement gap," as school year solutions do not take away from the negative impact of summer learning setback (p. 21).

Students from low-income families are affected by summer learning loss at a higher rate because of the disparity in family/community involvement in reading activities over the summer, a lessened access to resources that promote reading, and lack of student motivation. All of these issues play a role in the gap between them and their high-income peers, and much of the reason why is due to the more prominent effect they have during the summer. Allington and McGill-Franzen (2017) reason that the quality and amount of contributions made by families and communities over the summer has a large impact on creating the gap between rich and poor students, because it is "during those summer months children were not attending school and had to rely on family and community resources" for their reading development (p. 6).

One aspect of this is the reading interactions between family members and children over the summer. The cyclical nature of poverty has resulted in lower reading abilities being passed down, in a way, to low SES students, as "parents in lower and middle-class communities differed widely in the skills and resources they had at their disposal" for working on their child's educational development (Neuman & Celano, 2001, p. 8). This is part of the reason why these same parents are "less likely to read a book to their child during the summer months," an interaction many higher SES students have opportunities in which to engage (Allington and McGill-Franzen, 2017, p.5). Furthermore, this difficulty to aid in their childrens' reading development is heightened for families who experience English as a second language. For these students, summer means "limited opportunities to practice English with family members," accounting for a setback in their language development (McGill-Franzen, Ward, & Cahill, 2016,

p. 591). Again, intersectionality of these language and SES factors can deepen the negative impact of Summer Reading Setback even further.

Not only do all of these parents, regardless of language background, often lack skills or time necessary to work with their children on their reading, but they also lack the tools and resources that are often used by middle- or upper-class parents to aid in students' summer reading development. These resources are typically less available or beneficial for low income families, often because they do not have the prior knowledge or exposure associated with taking full advantage of them. Allington and McGill-Franzen (2017) argue that at the root of summer reading setback is the "more restricted access to books and other reading material" experienced by children from low SES families (p. 12). Without access to books, students are less likely to have opportunities to voluntarily read over the summer.

Some may question why family members do not just find the time to take their children to a local library, but the solution to SRS is not as simple as this. Barriers in transportation and time are only the first layer of challenges facing low income families' engagement with libraries. Several studies have demonstrated that libraries in low income areas are overall less conducive to reading development, including a survey of two libraries led by Neuman and Celano, discussed in their article *Worlds Apart: One City, Two Libraries, and Ten Years of Watching Inequality Grow*. Both of these libraries resided in the same city and were publicly funded by the same taxpayer base. However, one was in a high-income area while the other was in a rundown, lower- income section of the city. While observing the differences between the two, they saw differences in interactions (between parents and children as well as librarians and patrons), library hours, and programs available to the patrons.

One of their arguments was that while there may be libraries technically available to low income families, “equal community-based resources do not create equal opportunity. We need to provide more resources and additional supports to students in poor neighborhoods” (Neuman & Celano, 2012, p. 20). Their reasoning in this argument was largely informed by the differences in interactions observed between parents and children at each library location. Parents in the low-income library wanted to provide their children with opportunities to read and grow but “often did not know what they could do to help,” which is why “helping parents understand which skills and capacities children will need” is a job that libraries in these areas need to work to address (p. 20). Furthermore, a concept titled the “digital divide” is another aspect of the failure of libraries in low-income areas, as the navigation skills needed by children and adults to utilize the digital resources in these libraries, whether it be to find books, do research, or play educational games, are often not developed in low income families (p.20). Comprehensively, these factors lead to a less enriching library experience for patrons of the lower SES library.

Over a course of ten years, Neuman and Celano’s research found that the “gap in the amount of time adolescents spent reading increased substantially,” with the library in the low-income community falling behind (2012, p. 23). This study, published in 2012, was inspired by a previously conducted survey of reading environments in general in low and middle-income communities, one which they carried out in 2001. This earlier study served as inspiration for them to research differences in libraries more closely, as libraries have a strong correlation to the potential for positive reading experiences. Unfortunately, the 2012 library-based study simply affirmed their previous research, in which they found that “environmental features in the middle-class neighborhoods supported reading activity to a far greater extent than in lower income neighborhoods” (2001, p. 19).

This information begs the question, why focus on reading development by targeting Summer Reading Setback, instead of all subjects? One would think that if students are falling behind in reading, math skills must be subsequently affected as well. McCombs and colleagues (2011) argue, "reading levels might be affected by factors outside of school more so than mathematics" because of the larger participation families and communities of all income levels have in reading activities rather than math (p. 23). Consequently, although math practice over the summer is not a bad idea, reading is the area of greatest need and concern. The cumulative nature of this summer reading loss also affirms its importance, because as students grow older "the effect of summer vacation changed from positive to negative and grew more detrimental" (p. 24).

Literacy is a large subject area, and it is valuable to understand what specific harm summer reading loss is doing to students' development. McCombs and colleagues (2011) found that children from low income backgrounds lost the most ground "specifically in reading comprehension and word recognition" when compared to their socioeconomically privileged peers (p. 22). Other studies have also affirmed "significant regression" over the summer "in skill areas such as phonological decoding, sight word reading, and reading rate" (Beach et. al., 2018, p. 264). When combined, all of these depleting skills combine to create the substantial and growing gap between America's low and high SES students.

When considering the subsequent information and summer reading loss' existence, it is important to dive deeper than students' immediate context of school and home life. As Neuman and Celano point out, we can no longer afford to ignore the

"institutionally organized practices and norms that affect social and school outcomes. Included among these are processes of mobility and opportunity, the social isolation in

poor neighborhoods and unequal resources that may further extend a community's social isolation, and the privileges and benefits derived from these resources." (2001, p. 23)

When considering all these factors, it is apparent that communities, school systems, families, and other components of a child's life all come together to create an influential web of support or lack thereof.

Section 3: Summer Reading Programs

It is precisely these entities, communities, school systems, families, etc., that need to come together to create programs to address the reality of summer reading loss. These programs have been referred to in a variety of ways, throughout this paper, including summer learning programs, reading clubs, summer literacy programs, and, most often, summer reading programs. They often have a collection of different objectives, are led and sponsored by different groups or organizations, and serve diverse groups of students. Overall, they aim to address students' academic growth through educational summertime programming, however large or small in scale.

Historically, summer reading programs are most commonly associated with public libraries. In her masters' thesis, Stephanie Bertin examines the history behind the summer reading programs led by libraries for youth in their communities. She cites a study done in 1998 by C.D. Fiore, stating that 95 percent of public libraries offer a summer program, to some extent (2004, p.3). The "beginnings of summer reading programs" can be traced back to the "late 1890's and early 1900's," indicating a longtime recognition for the benefits they can provide students over the summer (p. 8). In her thesis, Bertin documents one of the first summer reading programs that most closely resembles today's libraries' programs. It was created by Caroline Hewins in Hartford Connecticut, complete with a theme, weekly talks, and a focus on reading

guidance. Bertin writes that Hewins' ideas and program left a lasting impact on future reading clubs and programs through its focus on reading guidance as well as its themed nature.

As time went on, new features of libraries' summer reading programs began to emerge, including subject lists, book recommendations, a focus on creating reading goals gauged with reading logs, and reward systems being put into place for students who achieve their goals. This use of incentives proved to be controversial. Some researchers claimed that the use of incentives interferes with creating an intrinsic love of reading, while advocates argued that they encourage more children to sign up for the programs . At this time, there were few programs with a clear goal to address inequities between students (Bertin, 2004, p. 15). Regardless, the development of reading programs continued, with some using incentives and others not.

For the period of 1920-1949, Bertin describes the growth of summer reading programs by articulating the many different ways they were implemented. It is apparent that each community library that ran such a program aimed to address their specific population of students/families, and it seems like often this required time to fine tune their approaches. Some programs used outreach tactics, going to playgrounds and schools, while others in rural areas with smaller libraries sent books home to students via the mail (Bertin, 2004). A key component during this time period was the furthered use of incentives and a competitive nature, sometimes calling them "summer reading contests," to motivate students to join such programs (p. 20). The programs continued to gain popularity all over the United States, and spurred discussion regarding their value and how they should be implemented.

By the 1950s, the "terminology of 'summer reading program' seemed to be fairly standard" for libraries and their patrons (Bertin, 2004, p. 40). An interesting development for this period of time was that the age limit for many of these programs was lowered, focusing on the

importance of developing reading skills in younger students as well. This is only one example of how Bertin's analysis of the progression of these programs picks up on some key developments in summer reading programs.

When examining today's summer reading programs, many of the components and developments that Bertin highlights can still be identified, including those lead by libraries as well as other base organizations. The focus on reading guidance put in place by Caroline Hewins stuck, with many programs using trained teachers or volunteers to instruct students on how to make the most of their reading or even performing specific interventions to target students' areas of need (Beach et. al., 2018, p. 265). Furthermore, many programs still use reading logs to track students' summer reading and may continue to use rewards to motivate students to fill out and turn in these logs (Bertin, 2004, p. 12). Many libraries were striving to conclude what practices were best to engage students in such programs, but it wasn't until the mid 1990s that there was "some discussion about best practices for summer reading," including the analysis of the negative outcomes of using incentives to encourage students to read rather than focusing on intrinsic motivation (p. 49). All in all, Bertin concluded that many of "these features have endured with few alterations over the years" (p. 57). The question is, however, do these key features need to be re-assessed in their effectiveness, especially within the contexts of specific communities?

These libraries and their programs are key components of increasing students' access to books over the summer months, however, the children of today are very different from the children of the past when these summer programs were beginning to be developed. Not only do they "have more demands on their time and attention than ever before," as Bertin asserts, but the need to consider the contexts of students' lives and their communities has become prevalent, as

well (2004, p. 61). Because “many large school districts do not offer [district-sponsored summer reading programs] to their high-need students,” libraries in areas with a greater percentage of such students need to become more intentional in their approach to addressing the unique needs of students who are labeled as “high-need,” whether it be because of their SES status or any other factor (McCombs et. al., p. 71). It is important that libraries, as well as other organizations, lead programs that acknowledge the backgrounds and unique challenges of these high-need students.

The aspect of district led summer programming is another component of summer reading programs. There are many different implementations of such summer programs, one being the formal mandatory summer school option. Mandatory summer school has often been forced upon students who are the lowest achievers of their grade level, in hopes that it will raise their academic achievement. Although this approach recognizes the importance that summer learning can have in a students’ retention and growth, it is not as effective in practice. Jordan D. Matsudaira, in his paper titled *Mandatory Summer School and Student Achievement,* writes that “virtually no credible evidence exists supporting summer school’s effectiveness in raising student achievement.” (2008, p. 1). Despite this lack of evidence, many schools continue to utilize summer school programs. McGill-Franzen and colleagues also argue that “children who choose to participate are more likely to be capable and motivated readers,” and unfortunately mandatory summer learning can take away this valuable concept of student choice (2016, p. 593).

Unfortunately, most schools do not implement mandatory summer school until students are at least in the upper elementary levels, and, more commonly, in high school. Although there is a lack of research in the field regarding the differences in mandatory elementary level summer

reading programs versus secondary programs, internet searches for summer school display a large majority of upper grade level programs. Regardless of the grade level, any mandatory approach puts the focus on remediating reading problems, rather than preventing problems in the first place. This is especially true when these programs are not implemented until later on in a students' academic career. When faced with the reality that many low-income students come to school already behind their richer peers, a focus on prevention, specifically in the earlier grades, seems necessary. As John Pikulski writes in his paper *Preventing Reading Failure: A Review of Five Effective Programs*, this "focus on correction rather than prevention continues in spite of an impressive and growing body of authoritative opinion and research evidence" that preventative methods are more effective in addressing students reading growth (1994, p. 30).

Rather than concentrating solely on this mandatory instruction focusing on remediation, I advocate that school districts and those involved in educational policy shift their focus to engaging students in voluntary reading programs during the summer months in order to most effectively target the needs of lower income students. Although "voluntary summer programs, mandatory summer programs, and at-home reading programs can all have positive effects on student achievement," it is my opinion that voluntary summer programs, when implemented with the correct features, can have an even stronger positive effect on students (McCombs et. al., 2011, p. 36). I would assert that this is especially true for those students coming from low income families, as it has been proven that school year instruction is not fulfilling its goal to catch them up to their peers. If participation is limited to mandatory summer programs, modeled after the more traditional school year approach, they will continue to fall through the cracks of education.

One way to strive to better address the needs of students through such voluntary programs is through partnerships between school districts, libraries, and other community-based organizations (CBOs) in their development, implementation, and assessment. McCombs and colleagues suggest that these programs "should be seriously considered within the context of students' needs and available resources," and one way to accomplish this objective is through the interweaving of as many influences in a student's life as possible (2011, p. 72). In their research and survey of several summer programs, McCombs and colleagues not only found that these partnerships "enable the creation and sustainment of high-quality voluntary summer learning programs" but they also found that they "provided increased benefits and lowered costs" as well (p. xviii-xvi). Through intertwining a broad network of organizations who partner together, these programs are more likely to succeed and band their shared resources into something more meaningful than if they were independently run.

It is important to keep in mind that even these voluntary summer reading programs can, and should, look very different from one another in their socioeconomic context, designs, objectives, partnerships, and funding. In an evaluation of summer reading interventions for struggling readers, Beach and colleagues describe some of the ways these programs can vary when they write that

> "some focus on access to books, whereas others focus on volume [of] reading over the summer. Some programs may be adaptations of summer school and include whole-class instruction, whereas others approximate tutoring programs and may or may not use volunteers or parent support." (2018, p. 265)

Many scholars have taken a look at how summer reading programs are implemented all over the United States in an effort to analyze their effectiveness. In an analysis of five separate summer

learning programs, which were sponsored by school districts, McCombs and colleagues found another set of factors "that may also influence the quality of programs" including professional development, student-to-instructor ratio, parent engagement activities, funding, strength of leadership, dedication of staff, student and staff recruitment techniques, and use of data for program improvement (2011, p. 6). All of these factors come together to create a large source of differences in how summer reading/learning programs are enacted, and to what degree they are effective.

One of the differences in the quality and implementation of these programs is whether or not parents or other family members are encouraged to be involved. There are many figures from a students' life who could potentially be involved in their academic growth, from biological parents, to grandparents, siblings, etc.; in this paper, parents will serve as an overarching word to refer to any of these influential figures in a child's life. Parents can be a key partner in making these programs as effective and meaningful as possible, especially for low income students. Parental involvement has the potential to impact these programs' success in multiple ways. McCombs and colleagues say that some benefits of involving parents include "high attendance rates" and the reinforcement of "learning in the home," key components of making sure the learning done in these programs sticks with students (2011, p. 66). When forming a plan on how to involve parents/family members, organizations need to consider the educational, cultural, and socioeconomic background of parents.

The previously established phenomenon that parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less versed in how to engage their students in meaningful literacy learning can be addressed through parental involvement in summer reading programs. Neuman and Celano suggest that libraries and programs "consider interventions and trainings that strategically

provide information and navigation skills to adults and their young children" when trying to reach out to parents (2012, p. 20). This training could be over a variety of topics, including how to promote comprehension when reading together, signing up for and using a library card, a demonstration on the available technology in local libraries, or many other aspects of incorporating positive literacy practices into everyday life. By giving parents, specifically low-income parents, the tools and lingo they need to support childrens' literacy development, it is more likely that students will continue to grow at home. Furthermore, if children see that their parents are involved and invested in the summer reading program, and therefore their growth as readers, they will be more encouraged to persevere as readers.

Parental involvement is only one way to extend and further the impact of summer reading programs; many researchers have tried to label what makes an effective summer reading program and as a result have described some features that help to define a successful program. In a broad statement regarding components of quality summer learning programs, McCombs and colleagues made the following observations in regard to what sets these programs up best for success. Through their research they found that, most often, quality programs have the following features: smaller class sizes, differentiated instruction, high quality instruction, alignment of school-year and summer curricula, engaging and rigorous programming, maximized participation and attendance, a sufficient duration, involved parents, and consistent evaluations of effectiveness (2011, p. 32-35). They also maintain the idea that the "ability to develop partnerships among school districts, government organizations, CBOs, and families may affect the quality of a program as well," furthering the role partnerships play in creating successful summer reading programs (2011, p. 6). It takes time, and funding, to achieve all of these features that quality summer reading programs should demonstrate.

When programs have most, or all, of these features, the benefits for students become apparent. Regardless of how they are implemented, summer reading programs almost always increase students' volume of reading over the summer. Historically, the positive correlation between access to books over the summer and achievement was established by Barbara Heyns. In her book *Summer Learning and the Effects of Schooling*, she writes that "the unique contribution of reading to summer learning suggests that increasing access to books and encouraging reading may well have a substantial impact on achievement," which are the primary objectives for most summer reading programs (1978, p. 172). The research on summer reading programs since then has confirmed her argument. McCombs and his colleagues write that research has pointed to several ways that students benefit from summer learning programs, including the fact that "they can master material that they did not learn during the previous school year, reverse summer learning loss, and even achieve learning gains" (2011, p. 72). These benefits last longer than just the summer or initial part of the school year. In fact, "longitudinal studies conclude that the effects of summer learning programs endure for at least two years after the student has engaged in the summer program," and if students consecutively participate in summer reading programs the effects will become cumulative (p. xv). Because of the "positive correlation between volume of reading activity and reading proficiency" established by Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding in 1998, it is understandable why many believe that simply giving students access to text and opportunities to interact with it has these positive effects on maintaining literacy achievement over the summer (as cited in Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2017, p. 13).

However, simply giving book access to children as a means of addressing Summer Reading Setback has been a controversial topic for researchers in the domain of summer

programs. Originally, Allington and colleagues (2010) found that supplying "books during the summer months results in improved reading achievement," and advocated for book distribution programs (p. 415). In 2017, Allington and McGill-Franzen revised this and said that "it was only children from low-income families who benefited from books for summer reading," and that summer book distribution programs need to allocate their resources accordingly (p. 16). McGill-Franzen and colleagues also write that book lending or distributing programs "cause improved attitudes toward reading, cause increased reading volume … cause accelerated development of emergent reading skills, and cause more proficient reading performance," citing many benefits for recipients in these programs (2016, p. 587). However, other researchers assert that more than simply distributing books needs to be done in order to result in increasing reading achievement. Beach and colleagues argue that "book access, even when students are given a choice in books, does not result in higher reading performance. However, scaffolded book access plus strategy instruction does," advocating for the inclusion of instruction when attempting to address Summer Reading Setback (2018, p. 265). It seems that these programs may be a good place to start if organizations and districts do not have the funds or resources to move beyond simple distribution, especially when working with low income students, however, they should move towards including scaffolded instruction whenever possible to maximize the many benefits possible for effective summer reading programs.

Despite the established benefits, there are still critics of summer reading programs. Traditionally, the focus has always been on school-year interventions to address the achievement gap between students in different socioeconomic groups. This is apparent in the attitudes of school districts towards summer programs, for example "interviewees from the National Summer Learning Association indicated that, given the costs, districts are uncertain of the value they

would get from a summer learning program," citing economic reasons for not looking further into these programs as a viable option (McCombs et. al., 2011, p. xvi). However, many studies have proved that these programs are worthwhile investments. John Pikluski is one researcher who has pointed to summer reading programs as an option that needs to be further explored to address the achievement gap because of their preventative nature, writing that "successful programs for the prevention of reading problems may seem expensive, but they are actually very cost effective when compared against the costs involved in remedial efforts" (1994, p. 30). This assertion has been reaffirmed by a side-by-side comparison, which found that "summer programming offered by a district tends to be less expensive on a per-week, per-pupil basis than education costs during the academic year," negating the argument that resources would be better allocated to school-year interventions (McCombs et. al., 2011, p. 49). This is possible without sacrificing any quality or student achievement, as "schools currently engage in reform and improvement efforts that are substantially more labor intensive and substantially more expensive but produce roughly the same effects on reading achievement as distributing free books for summer reading" (Allington et. al., 2010, p. 423). These research-backed statements each provide substantial evidence that summer reading programs are a worthwhile investment for school districts seeking to address Summer Reading Setback and the achievement gap.

Section 4: Readers to Leaders Analysis

Based off of the influence I believed summer reading programs could have on addressing the achievement gap, I chose to implement one in my own hometown of Palatine, Illinois. Palatine is a Northwest suburb of Chicago, and although it is regarded as a fairly affluent village, with a median household income of $80,521 according to City-Data.com, many of the local elementary school district's, Community Consolidated School District 15 (CCSD15), students

are considered eligible for free or reduced-price lunches (2016). On average in 2016, 46.5% of students per school were eligible for this program, which is used as the basis to describe them as coming from low-income families (Illinois State Board of Education, 2016). Growing up, I never realized that this number was so high because many of the schools I attended in the same district had lower percentages of students eligible for this program. Unfortunately, as happens in many larger towns/villages, there tends to be a difference in population between schools in different areas of Palatine which has resulted in a subsequent difference in the poverty levels as well. For example, the school I went to, Hunting Ridge Elementary, only had 19.34% of students eligible in 2016 while another elementary school in the district, Jane Addams Elementary School, had 76.38% of students eligible (Illinois State Board of Education, 2016).

In accordance with the previously established correlation that this difference in income levels often results in a difference between academic achievement between low- and high-income students, Palatine schools follow this trend. When comparing schools in Palatine based off of their students' eligibility for free/reduced price lunches, the trend of lower academic achievement is correlated. Continuing the previous comparison of the higher average income Hunting Ridge Elementary and lower average income Jane Addams Elementary, in 2018 Hunting Ridge had 62% of students score proficiently on the PARCC English/Language Arts (ELA) standardized test while Jane Addams had 19% of their students score proficiently on the same exam (Illinois State Board of Education, *Illinois State Report Card*, 2018). This is only one comparison that denotes the achievement gap present in CCSD15's elementary schools.

Having grown up and gone into the field of education, and choosing to concentrate in reading instruction, these differences became more apparent and unsettling to me and I wanted to do something to address the problem. In the 2017-2018 school year I learned about the

importance that Summer Reading Setback can play in creating the gap and started to entertain the idea of carrying out a summer reading program to try and target the differences between low- and high-income students in Palatine. I was aware that Palatine has a large Hispanic population as well, and according to the *Illinois State Report Card* site provided by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), 39.6% of students in the district identify as Hispanic/Latino in 2018 (2018). Living in Palatine, I was aware of the belief that the schools with the most Hispanic/Latino students typically perform less well academically than the rest of the schools in the district, and in accordance with the ELA PARCC test proficiency versus average household income, these schools are typically serving lower income families as well. Upon researching this claim further, I found that the data collected by the ISBE supports this trend. In Figure 2, below, I compare the 4 schools with the highest percentage of students eligible for free/reduced lunches and found that they had a majority of Hispanic/Latino students and a quarter or less of students ranking proficiently on their ELA PARCC test.

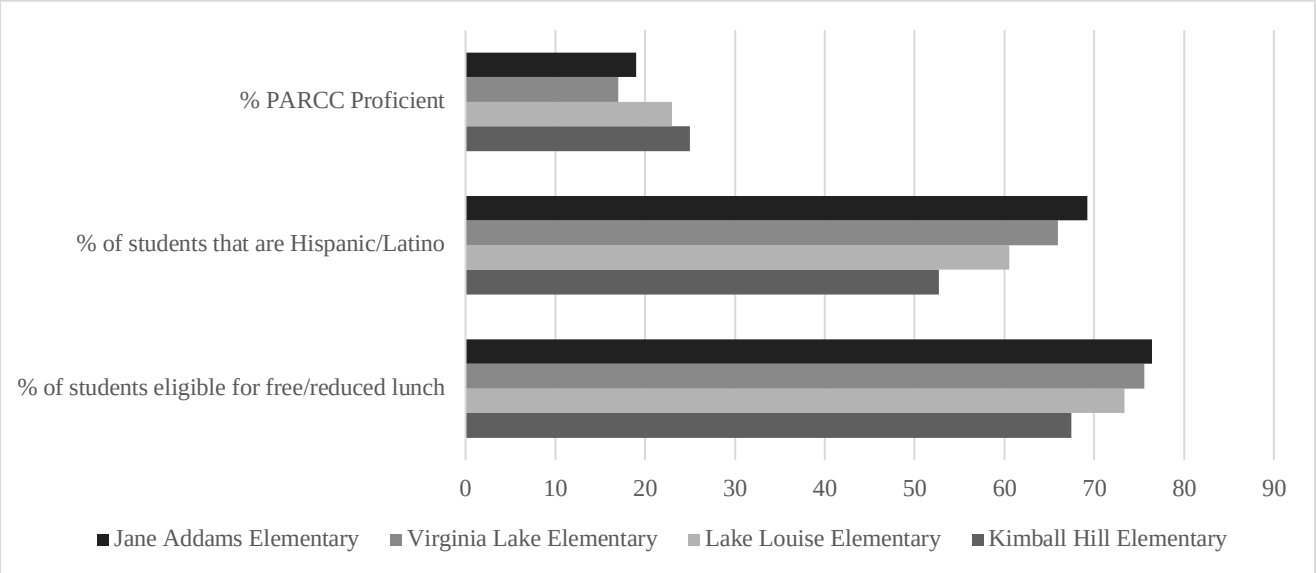

Figure 2. Comparison of CCSD15 Schools with Highest Percentages of Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Price Lunch

This trend between low-income and Hispanic/Latino students consistently going to schools that score lower in ELA proficiency gave me the idea to reach out to a local organization, Partners for Our Communities (POC), that often works with this population of residents in Palatine and other near-by suburbs. According to their website's homepage, POC describes themselves as an organization that "connects people with local resources and provides a pathway for their integration and success," and ultimately are "dedicated to helping people help themselves through a variety of programs and services" (POC, 2015). I have volunteered with POC on several occasions in the past and thought that their commitment to forming partnerships and existing partnership with CCSD15 made them a clear first choice for an organization that could help me start a summer reading program.

After reaching out to and meeting with Kathy Millin, POC's Director, in January of 2017, POC officially agreed to support the unnamed summer reading program I was going to develop. POC understood the impact that Summer Reading Setback has on many of the children that already are recipients of their services and wanted to collaborate to address this problem. They also respected my desire to make sure the program was not rigidly academic, as I wanted to establish a sense of fun and student choice in order to attract a greater number of students. We decided that since this would be the first summer of running the program, we would start with holding it one night a week for two hours during June and July, for a total of 16 hours over the course of the summer. This program was to be separate from their already existing summer day camp, in order to target a different group of students who may only be available in the evenings. As Mrs. Millin and other POC staff members began to explore funding options, including the POC budget and possible grants to apply for, I began to formulate a plan which developed into the "Readers to Leaders Summer Reading Program" for the summer of 2018.

One of the other partners I reached out to was the Palatine Public Library (PPL), specifically the Branch Supervisor of the location inside of POC's facility, Karen Bollman. PPL runs its own summer reading program each summer, which has students write down and keep track of the number of books they read over the summer months. Depending on their age, once they hit a certain number of books read, they could turn in their book log to receive prizes. Students who joined "Readers to Leaders" signed up for this program and were encouraged to keep track of their books read. This was only one component of the summer reading program I developed but partnering with PPL and Karen Bollman's personal support was crucial in giving students in "Readers to Leaders" access to a wide variety of books over the summer.

Another step in getting this program started was creating a team of volunteers who would be invested in students' success. As we did not have the budget to hire certified teachers or tutors, I reached out to many of my friends and acquaintances in the Palatine area who were also in school to become teachers. Furthermore, POC had an existing broad base of student volunteers that I reached out to as well, along with the Family and Consumer Science Department Chairs at the three local high schools. By the time the program started in June of 2018, we had a team of fourteen volunteers, myself included. Two of these volunteers were POC staff members, Kathy Millin and Teresa Kelly, but the rest were upper high school and college students, many of which are interested in pursuing a career in education. Five of these student volunteers, myself included, are pursuing a degree in elementary education specifically, which made the team adept to student needs and how to address them. Volunteers were regarded as "Reading Buddies" by students in order to establish a friendly and nurturing relationship between them and the students in the program. We held one formal training night prior to the start of the program, during which I reviewed the purpose of the program, expectations for volunteers, what their responsibilities

would be from week to week, and a general schedule for the weekly nights our program would meet. Because of the variability in summer schedules due to jobs, vacations, or other responsibilities, every volunteer was not present every night the program was held. On a regular basis, the program usually had a 2 student:1 volunteer ratio. This allowed students to receive quite a bit of individualized attention that maximized the two hours they were with us a week.

When it came to marketing the program to families, Kathy Millin and POC played a large role in students signing up for the program. They were able to reach out to families that already participated in their variety of other services and advertise the program with flyers I created around their facility. Families signed up for the program at the facility or by contacting Mrs. Millin or myself. The first night, the "Kick-Off," we had 26 students show up with their families. Anyone who was not already signed up for a library card or the library's summer reading program was assisted in doing so. As a result, 10 new library cards were issued to members of the "Readers to Leaders" program as well as their family members and approximately 15 students were signed up for the library's summer reading program. After the initial Kick-Off, attendance averaged around 12.5 students per night, illustrated in Figure 3, below.

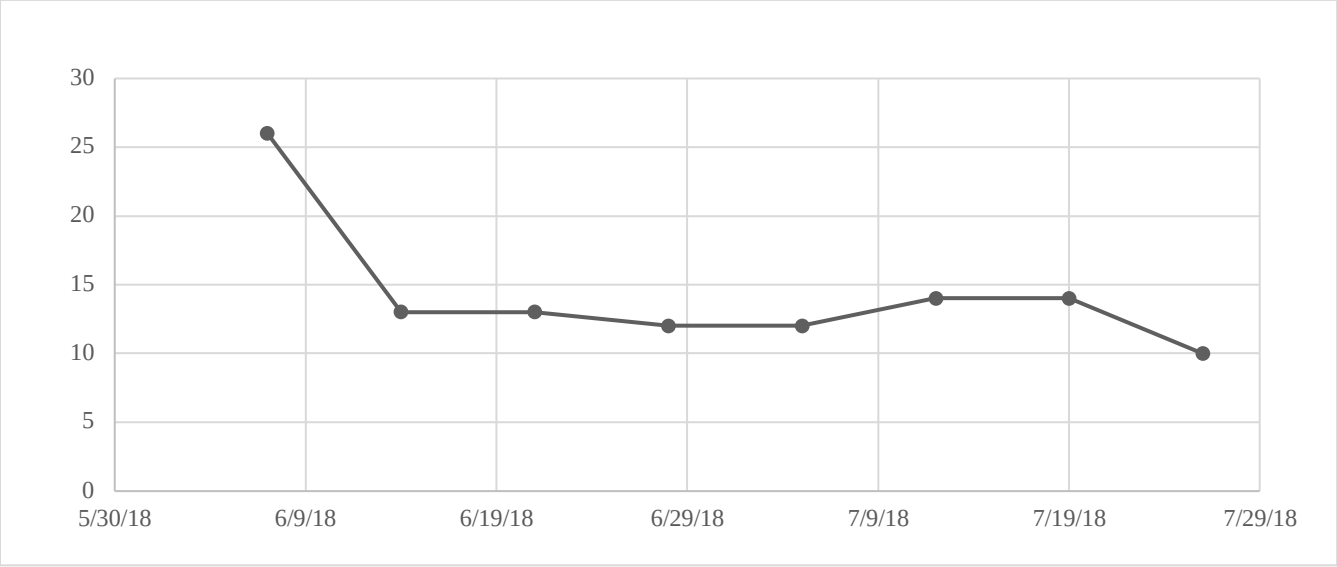

Figure 3. Readers to Leaders Summer 2018 Student Attendance

Many of the students enrolled in Readers to Leaders were from a low-income Hispanic/Latino background and went to the lower performing CCSD15 schools. The majority were also first-generation English speakers, which could have created a communication barrier between parents and Readers to Leaders volunteers. Luckily, there was a Bilingual Liaison on POC's staff who spoke Spanish and was able to translate whenever necessary. This was a huge asset and made collaborating with parents much easier, which was a goal of our program. This also meant that many of our students did not hear English on a regular basis over the summer, at least in their home setting, which could impact their literacy development/retention over summer break. Keeping this background in mind, PPL's librarian often pulled books for students still developing their knowledge of English that featured both English and Spanish text.

The students within the main Readers to Leaders program ranged in grade level from incoming first graders to incoming third graders. However, we also offered an additional classroom that students' siblings and parents could stay at during the course of the two-hour session each Thursday. This was led by two of POC's staff members and a volunteer. The older students in the extra classroom ranged in grades from fourth to seventh and were also taken to check out books at the library and engage in literacy activities and games by a volunteer. Parents were also encouraged to stay in the additional classroom, where they discussed challenges and triumphs in students' interactions with literacy, their impressions of the program, and developed a sense of community centered around a shared interest in students' reading development. These components of the Readers to Leaders program were important in increasing parental support and involvement in summer reading as well as offered a solution for attendance issues for parents who may have difficulty dropping off only one of their children.

My interactions and planning were predominantly focused on the primary grade level students, because of the large volume of students and impact early interventions can have on future literacy development. When planning the program, I wanted to have a weekly theme that we explored through an interactive schedule of activities. The typical two-hour nights had the following schedule:

- Library/Reading Check-in time: Students check in and are grouped with their reading buddy. Each Thursday has an accompanying theme. The week before each Thursday night, the students will check out a book that pertains to the theme and read it at home (hopefully with a parent or older sibling) before coming in. As groups go in and out of the library, Reading Buddies perform a short **"**reading check in**"** with each member of their group. This is meant to feel informal and like a friendly conversation. This consists of asking students in their group about the book they read over the course of the last week, asking if they have any questions about the book or if they didn't know any words, seeing if their parents or a sibling read with them, etc.
- Read Aloud/Snack: As students eat a small meal/snack, either a guest speaker, myself, or one of the staff/volunteer team members read a book aloud that pertains to the theme.
- Brief Discussion about the book/theme: This will take place immediately after the read aloud, while a few designated volunteers will help clean up with snack. Whoever did the read aloud asks some simple follow up questions to get students' minds working.
- Stations: Students break into small groups with their usual reading buddy and go through a writing station (in response to the read aloud), game/activity station (having to do with the theme) and read-to-someone-else station (where they can read to the volunteer or a

partner in their group). Depending on the week, these stations are flexible to if there were any special guests or not.

- Wrap Up: This is a flexible time every week. Students may play a whole group game, a get-to-know-you activity, or finish up with reading check-ins as necessary.

These activities were chosen very intentionally. By having students read books on the theme's topic the week before and conducting an interactive read aloud on it, students were able to build their background knowledge. Background knowledge is a key piece of making new information relevant to students, especially English Language Learners (ELLs) (Wessels, 2012). Students were still able to choose the books that they read, utilizing the motivating factor of student choice to interest students in the books they read. Another intentional feature was having a snack each week for students, because this is a motivating factor for many parents and students to attend each week. The stations were also intentionally selected in order to expose students to a variety of literacy activities each week. By working on writing, reading, and a game, there was always a balance between academics and fun, and the small group setting with their reading buddy gave students a supportive environment to practice their skills.

Over the course of the summer Readers to Leaders also featured special guests that matched weekly themes, in order to build student interest and further involve members of the community. One of our guests was Officer Paco of the Palatine Police Department and another was an emotional support therapy dog from one of the local hospitals. These opportunities were intentionally selected to match various weekly themes as well as expose students to different individuals in their community. They were very engaging opportunities and students always took full advantage of interacting with the guests and asking many questions about their jobs and experiences.

The kick-off and closing night celebrations were also deliberately designed and implemented in order to generate students' interest and excitement towards reading and Readers to Leaders. This was accomplished through special snacks and food, crafts, games, and getting to know the other students and Reading Buddies. Students interests were surveyed at the kick-off event so that Reading Buddies and myself could use this information to help plan future instruction tailored to student interests.

Throughout the program, we used various methods to measure student growth the best we could. We were unable to get specific test scores or data from CCSD15 so students were initially placed in groups based off of grade level and then rearranged based off of the volunteers' observations. Volunteer feedback was crucial to regularly adjusting groups and instruction to students' needs. They filled out a weekly reading check-in form on a half sheet of paper to record this conversation with each child that features the following questions: What did you read? Did anyone read this book with you or listen to you read it aloud? Can you please summarize the book for me? Were there any words that you did not recognize? If you were the author, how would you change the end of the book and why? Volunteers would turn this form into me by the end of each Thursday, and I also checked in with volunteers before and after each Thursday night in order to gauge students' growth and needs.

Furthermore, at the beginning and end of the summer, parents were surveyed for their input on students' literacy attitudes and development. Figures 4 and 5 portray the results of questions from this survey, and 100% of parents said that they would want their child to return to the program the following summer. These results demonstrate the worth that parents saw in the program. Not only did 88% of parents say they saw an increase in the amount of reading their child engaged in that summer, but 63% agreed that the program encouraged their child to start to

enjoy reading more. This increased motivation and engagement in reading models some of the positive effects of Readers to Leaders.

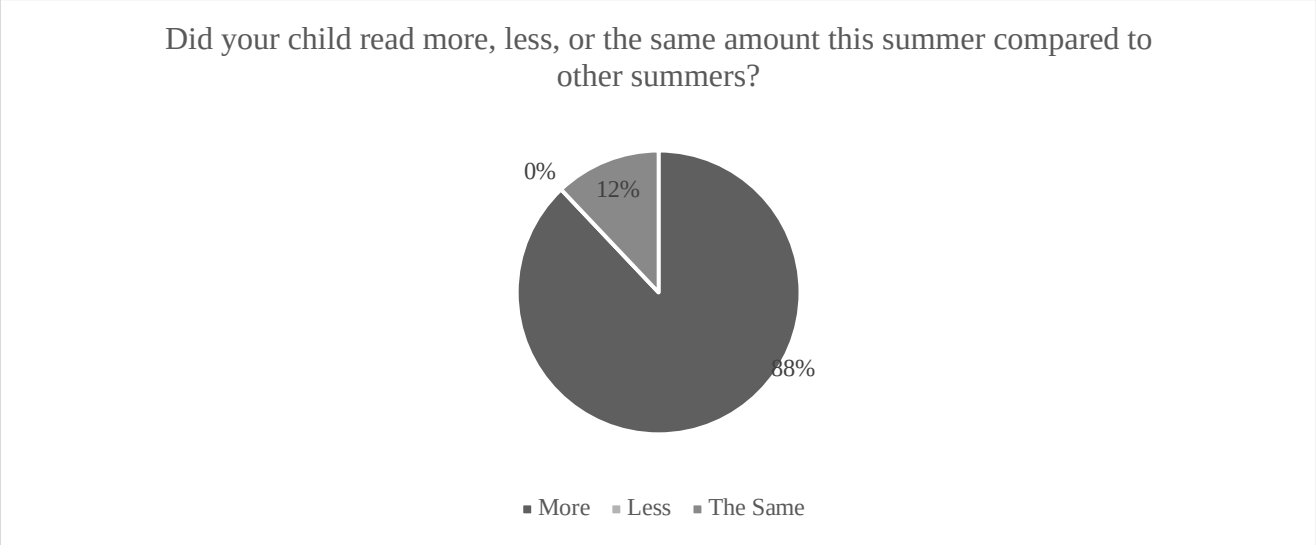

Figure 4: Parent Responses to Children's Reading Attitudes

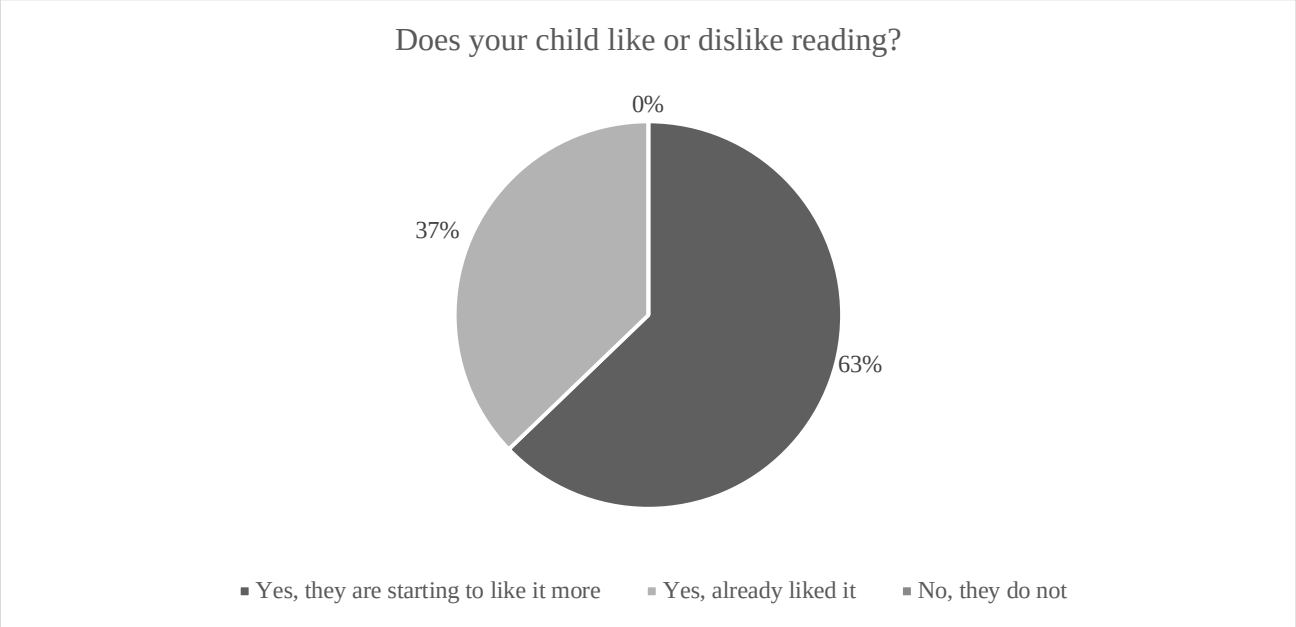

Figure 5: Parent Responses to Childrens' Reading Attitudes

Students were also surveyed at the beginning and end of the program on their attitudes towards reading as well as interests. These results show the changes in students' attitudes towards reading. Figure 6 represents students' initial and end responses to the question "Do you

like to read?" with 70% of students by the end of the program saying yes. Figure 7 represents students' responses to whether or not they would call themselves a good reader, which surveys their self-perception and confidence with reading. From the beginning to the end of the summer, there was an almost 50% increase in the percentage of students who would call themselves a good reader, showing a correlation between summer literacy engagement through Readers to Leaders and students' confidence as readers.

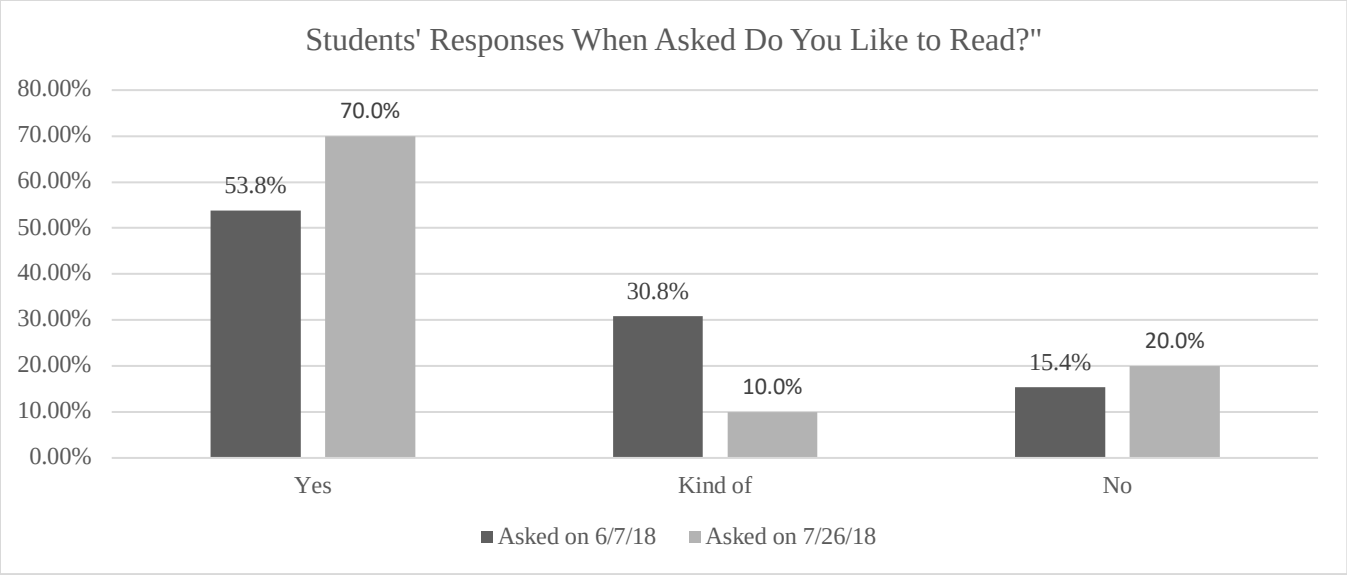

Figure 6: Readers to Leaders Student Survey Responses at Beginning and End of Summer

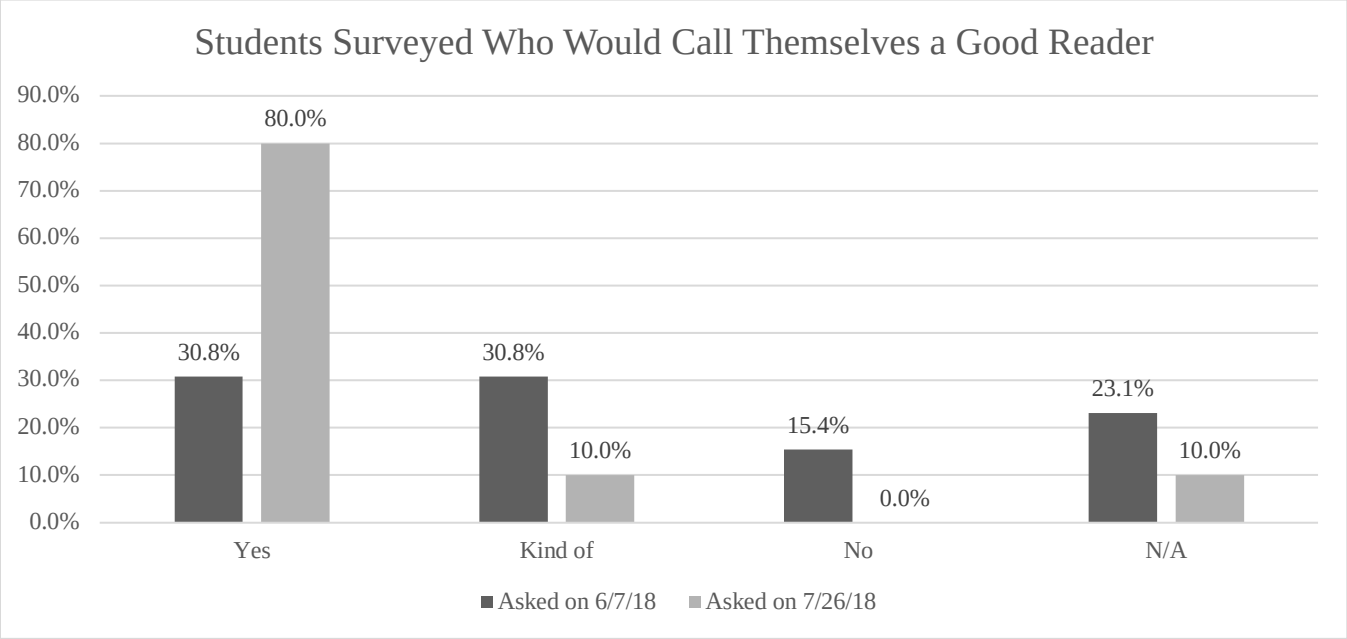

Figure 7: Readers to Leaders Student Survey Responses at Beginning and End of Summer

After analyzing the program and its results, some perceived benefits became apparent. According to figures 6 and 7, students involved in the program became more confident readers, as well as developed a more positive demeanor towards the act of reading. This will benefit them as they go into the school year and have to work on their reading in a more formal setting. This is supported by the statement that “reading for pleasure conveys not only skills and knowledge

useful for school but also a disposition toward learning that makes school congenial and even enjoyable" (McGill-Franzen, Ward, & Cahill, 2016, p. 585). Students also got to witness the enthusiasm and support of their community, family members, and friends for their reading development through the volunteers and family engaged in the program. This support will hopefully continue to motivate students and inform their understanding of the importance of reading for their future. Furthermore, CCSD15 confirmed that 100% of students in the program who had a pre- and post-test showed an increase in scores on "MAP" tests, Measure of Academic Progress exams given by the district every spring and fall, rather than experiencing Summer Reading Setback. This qualitative as well as quantifiable data demonstrates the beneficial nature of Readers to Leaders for its student participants.

Another benefit for both the library and students/families was the addition of many new library patrons as well as increased enrollment in PPL's summer reading program. A minimum of ten new library cards and accounts were assigned to students and their family members, as well as a general awareness of the services and resources available at Palatine libraries. Checking out new books every Thursday gave students an opportunity to learn about how to pick books that fit their reading level and interests with the support of their Reading Buddy (volunteer). The skill of being "adept at self-selection of appropriate out-of-school reading material" is important for students to develop in order to continue their reading development over the summer, according to McGill-Franzen, Ward, and Cahill (2016, p. 587). Also, parents and students who previously did not possess a library card were able to familiarize themselves with the location inside of POC's facility and all it has to offer for learners of all ages as well as became more comfortable with the process of checking out books. By increasing students' and families' access

to books and resources over the summer by facilitating interaction with the local library, Readers to Leaders set students up to hopefully continue to use these resources in the future.

Furthermore, volunteers also benefitted from the opportunity. By reaching out to high school and college students, these young people had the opportunity to interact with students and learn from their time volunteering with them. Many of the volunteers were going into the field of education and had the opportunity to develop their classroom management skills, their knowledge of literacy instruction, as well as their awareness of the socio-economic gap between students of different classes. This opportunity has the potential to inspire these future educators to be more conscientious of how they address this gap in their future classrooms as well as how they can advocate for similar programs in the future.

I attribute some of the success of this program to one of the key objectives I had when developing this program, which was ensuring that students had a positive experience by intertwining literacy instruction with activities that would be appealing to them. By creating an environment that promoted both fun and learning, students were more likely to return each week. McGill-Franzen, Ward, and Cahill agree with this approach, as they write that "guidance that seems too much like school may not be as effective" during summer instruction (2016, p. 594). This approach was endorsed by parents of students in Readers to Leaders as well. On the final surveys, many parents wrote statements indicating their positive experience, such as "We would love to come back, thank you to all the people who make this happen" and "I hope next year we [will be] back again, I really love this program." Students also voiced their enjoyment every week to volunteers, and were disappointed when the final night of the program arrived.

Another reason I believe this program was successful was the involvement of parents and other family members in the program, which is an attribute many analyses of summer reading

programs cited as having a positive influence (McCombs et. al., 2011; McGill-Franzen, Ward, & Cahill, 2016; Neuman & Celano, 2012). Consistently throughout the program we gave parents the opportunity to offer feedback and direction, as they are the true experts on their own children. This came in the form of written surveys as well as conversations at the beginning and end of each Thursday night, which was a form of formative assessment that informed future instruction. For example, parents would articulate their students' areas of need, which would in turn inspire a station addressing that skill in the following weeks. Additionally, parents and older siblings were encouraged to stay for the course of the program. For parents, this included engaging in discussions that developed their own knowledge of reading development and how to best aid their children's growth. For older siblings, they interacted and played games that developed their own literacy skills. They were all also encouraged to join the youngest students when guests came in as well, giving them shared literacy experiences to discuss at home. By engaging entire families, students were able to see that literacy development is a life-long commitment and parents were better equipped to further their students' growth at home.

Familial involvement was one of many practices in place that helped to further the quality of the program, falling in line with McCombs' and colleagues' evaluation of successful reading programs. Another one of these practices was partnering with POC, the local organization whose facility we held the weekly meetings at, which allowed for the space and resources needed to develop an effective summer reading program. Teaming up with POC lead to other partnerships with community entities, including the Palatine Public Library and the special guests from the Palatine Police Department and local community hospital. This partnership not only aided with funding, but also with providing students with meaningful experiences throughout the summer.

Another strength of the program was the student-to-instructor ratio, which provided students with lots of one-on-one attention. Although our volunteers were not certified teachers or tutors, many were experienced in working with and teaching elementary school children. Additionally, the one-to-one or two-to-one ratio of students to volunteers gave students the attention they needed to succeed. This attention is supported as instrumental to students' growth, as John J. Pikluski writes that "Individual or very small group (no more than 4 or 5 students) instruction is essential" when working with students who are falling behind in reading (1994, p. 38). Smaller ratios enable instructors to make more detailed observations of students' development which informed their future interactions and instruction. It also engaged the students, as they formed a closer relationship with the "Reading Buddy" they were paired with every week.

As this was the first summer for Readers to Leaders, there were limitations for the program's development. For example, in the future, partnerships will already be in existence and continue to grow. Building on existing partnerships will also lead to new ones, which in turn will lead to a more encompassing communal summer reading program. It is my hope that as Readers to Leaders collects more data and becomes better established in the community of Palatine, other community resources will be more likely to support the program's growth.

One specific entity I hope to continue to build a strong relationship with is CCSD15, the local school district, as their data and input would be invaluable to appropriately addressing student needs. Policies on student/family privacy barred us from attaining test scores or other data directly from CCSD15, which could in the future lead to more beneficial groupings and instruction through information about students' strengths and areas for growth. This differentiation is key for a program such as Readers to Leaders, which serves students from several grade levels. This would also help to better align the program with educational standards,

because instruction could better address the standards students have yet to meet. Furthermore, collaboration would aid with the collection of data as test scores would provide a direct comparison for students' growth. Beach and colleagues support such collaboration when they write about the importance of recognizing that "it takes a coordinated effort of schools and community agencies mobilizing to support all children to become proficient readers," which is the aim of all involved partners (2018, p. 263). By continuing to grow this partnership, Readers to Leaders can better serve its students.

Another option for potential growth would be increasing the duration of the program through meeting more days out of the week or having students stay longer each night Readers to Leaders is held. Allington and McGill-Franzen highlight the "importance of the volume of successful reading experiences in the development of reading proficiency," and summertime literacy development follows this trend (2003, p. 23). By increasing the amount of time students spend at Readers to Leaders, their positive interactions with literacy would increase and further their growth as readers. More parents could also be encouraged to stay, as there is a relationship between "family literacy events focused on teaching parents how to use comprehension strategies while reading in English and Spanish with their children" and the reading development of English Language Learners, which many of the students in Readers to Leaders are (McGill-Franzen, Ward, & Cahill, 2016, p. 591). Increased attendance on the part of both students and parents would be a potential area of growth to focus on in the future now that Readers to Leaders has officially had its first successful summer.

By reflecting on the program's strengths as well as limitations and potential areas of growth, it becomes clear that Readers to Leaders has a solid foundation to progress forward. Its initial success in providing its students with positive literacy interactions, which led to a growth

in reading skills and a more positive attitude towards reading, should serve as inspiration to further develop the program. Some ways to continue to build the program could be through continuing to assess students and collect data, strengthening existing partnerships, using data collected to support the program and seek out grants or other resources, and increasing the amount of time students and parents are engaged in the program. All in all, I am proud of Readers to Leaders and excited to see what the future holds for the program and its students.

Conclusion: Looking Toward the Future

After researching the correlation between summer reading programs and the potential they have to minimize the gap between low-income and high-income students, as well as reflecting upon my own summer reading program, Readers to Leaders, I am prepared to make the assertion that summer reading programs deserve more attention and funding. The research supports their ability to address summer learning setback through the role they play in increasing students' access to books over summer months as well as through the instruction they provide students. Not only did my program demonstrate its ability to prevent summer learning setback for the students in it, but this same result has been replicated in other studies as well (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2017; Allington et. al., 2010; Augustine et. al., 2016; Horowitz & Samuels, 2017). These programs take on different pathways to attain various objectives involving addressing students' literacy growth over the summer months, but ultimately their work to minimize summer reading loss is imperative to addressing the growing gap between students in different socioeconomic classes. This establishes the need to further fund and research what can be done to both improve these programs and make them a reality throughout the United States.

In order to move forward and support the development of summer reading programs, many different entities need to be involved. The concept of building partnerships is not limited to

Readers to Leaders, but a model that should be present for all summer reading programs. On a local level, partnerships can be developed between community outreach organizations, libraries. school districts, businesses, individuals of different professions, and families. Neuman and Celano support this approach, arguing that "we must begin to calibrate school and public library activity (and thus the allocation of resources)" in order to ensure the success of students coming from low income areas (2012, p. 25). By teaming up, these local agencies offer a web of support to students. On a broader level, government bodies can become involved in order to provide funding for programs and research. Scholars and universities can continue to do studies on how to make summer learning most effective. The importance of the involvement of these groups is pointed out by the Annie. E. Casey Foundation in their analysis of the negative impact of poverty on students' academic performance, reiterating that "federal, state, and local governments will be essential in the development and funding of … summer learning opportunities" for students falling into the academic gap (2011, p. 11).

Once these partnerships are created and summer reading programs become more invested in as a whole, students can begin to benefit to an even greater degree. Student participants themselves will be more invested in their development when they see the encouragement offered to them by all of the previously stated cooperating partners, including their family members and communities. This type of support can only become a reality through the investment of time, research, and resources into using summer reading programs as a solution to the gap between students in separate socioeconomic classes. This gap not only holds back individual students, but entire populations of low income children who are not given the same opportunity to attain academic success as their higher income peers. As a result, society as a whole is missing out on the possible achievements of these students who are not being pushed to their full potential.

Therefore, investing in summer reading programs is investing in the future of generations to come, and valuing the success of all students equally.

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